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ABSTRACT

A comparison between the common myths of "rural existence" and the documented realities of rural living explodes the myth that rural living is generally stress free, shows that life stress in rural settings can have deleterious effects on the function of individual and family, and provides a basis for exploring some implications of rural stress for the provision of social services. A simplistic definition of stress--the nonspecific response of the body to any demand--is useful for understanding the interactions between individuals or families and the environment. Although the rural lifestyle is often pictured as peaceful, slow, and free of stress, for many rural residents life is often characterized by harsh circumstances that threaten the very fabric of their existence. Rural residents experience: greater incidence, prevalence, and severity of malnutritution than their urban counterparts; the nation's highest rates of maternal and infant mortality; higher unemployment and underemployment rates; a greater increase in the divorce rate; and a greater incidence of poverty, substandard housing, and contaminated drinking water. There are three significant categories of rural stressors: economic and employment, community, and environmental. Only after caseworkers and agencies recognize and understand rural stressors and their attendant deleterious effects can appropriate intervention strategies and policies be addressed. (BRR)

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Rural Stress: Myths and Realities[1]

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ABSTRACT

"Rural Stress: Myths and Realities"

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The paper examines some of the myths and realities of rural life, comparing myths that portray rural life as idyllic and pristine to some of the economic, social and psychological realities that are consistent and powerful sources of stress for many clients of social service agencies and professionals. Implications for social workers and social service programs are discussed.

Introduction

Anyone who has resided in a rural area for any length of time realizes that there are existent in both folklore and media a substantial number of myths about the tranquility of "rural existence." This paper examines a few of the common myths of "rural existence" and compares them to some of the documented realities of rural living. The thesis of the paper is that such a comparison should explode the overall myth that rural living is generally stress free, at least in comparison to common impressions of urban existence, and that life stress in rural settings can have deleterious effects on the functioning of the individual and the family. Finally, some implications of rural stress for the provision of social services are explored.

Stress Defined

In its most basic form, stress can be conceptualized as whatever reaction is caused by a stressor.[4] However, this type of definition still leaves unanswered the question of what stress really is, as a unique, identifiable conceptual entity, because, by definition, we are now forced to define the term stressor in order to define the term stress. A better, yet still simplistic, definition, is that it is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand. Such a definition provides us with a conceptual model for understanding the interactions between individuals or families and the environment.

This interactional approach requires us to consider two concepts, demands and fit. Individuals and/or families make certain demands on the environments in which they find themselves. Melson[6] has indicated that these demands, which we can basically consider as expectations about what the environment should provide, are usually unspoken. Examples of such unspoken demands or expectations include

a minimal sense of identity for an individual and identification as a family unit. Others would include demands for emotional closeness, communication, flexibility and solidarity.

Just as families and individuals differ in the demands they make on specific environments they find themselves in, environments, too, differ in the demands they make on individuals and families within them. Individual family members, and occasionally entire family systems, move in and out of various immediate environmental settings during any typical time frame. These have been described by Bronfenbrenner[2] as microsystems. It is the number of microsystems and the ease of making transitions among them that can be characterized as environmental demands. Additionally, these demands differ not only in the total number of expectations, but also in their complexity and coherence.

The complexity and contradiction which may exist within any given immediate environment can and often does exist between all the various immediate environments of the individual or the family unit. Within this collection of immediate environments, Bronfenbrenner's[2] mesosystem, an individual or a family will encounter a variety of different expectations or demands for a certain set of behaviors across different settings. For example, one would expect to encounter a variety of different behavioral expectations between home, work, recreation and church.

Finally, there are "indirect" interactions, known as exo- and macrosystem levels,[2] which produce their own environmental stress. These include everything from third party indirect involvement in individual microsystems to local and national policies and regulations which create expectations on the individual or the family.

It is the "fit" between environmental and family or individual demands that determines the presence and/or level of stress that is experienced. If there is

a "good fit" between demands we can assume that the family or individual has been successful in "adapting" the presenting circumstances, while a lack of fit characterizes a certain level of stress. However, as Melson[6] pointed out, just as adaptation does not necessarily signify successful stress management, stress itself is not bad. It is how one adapts, and what one does with a stressful situation that is most important. Individual perception also plays an extremely critical role in the concept of environmental demands. The same event or demand can be perceived quite differently by different individuals, and such unique perceptions of demand directly influence the "fit" of the situation.

Myths of Rural Living

> I consider it the best part of an education to have been born and brought up in the country.
>
> Amos Bronson Alcott

Seldom does one hear negative comments concerning country or rural living. The same can be said of positive viewpoints of urban life. The point to be made is that, regardless of geographical location, one regularly hears the virtues of country living extolled, often at the expense or criticism of urban life or dwellers.

"Living the good life," a phrase popularized by a book of the same title,[9] has been a rallying cry for a generation of urban dwellers who have sought to forsake the stress and tension of urban existence for the perceived peace and tranquility of rural settings. With a subtitle of "How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World," the Nearing premis was that rural life was the only life-style capable of producing the simplicity necessary for a sane and satisfying existence.

When we think of rural lifestyles we most often envision a slow-paced existence, one that is peaceful and free of much of the stress, strain and

bustle of urban settings. Pictured is a healthy environment in which to raise children, a place where family ties and friendships are valued, maintained and enriched, where values of honesty, hard work, self-reliance and independence predominate, and where financial concerns are reduced because everything is owned and grown. Skill levels in many domains are pictured as being proportionally more simplistic than those required for urban living.

The Realities of Country Life

Reality is substantially different. As Coward and Jackson[3] pointed out, family life in rural America is seldom as pristine as tradition and the national pundits would have you believe. For many rural residents, life is often characterized by harsh circumstances that threaten the very fabric of their existence. They point out the following contradictions, or realities, of country life:

- -Rural residents experience a greater incidence, prevalence and severity of malnutrition than their urban counterparts;
- -Almost one-half of all occupied substandard housing and about two-thirds of all houses without adequate plumbing are located in rural communities;
- -Rural families have the Nation's highest rates of maternal and infant mortality;
- -Unemployment and underemployment rates are higher for rural than for urban areas;
- -The rate of increase in divorces in rural areas exceeds that of metropolitan America.
- -Whereas one in nine urban resident lives below the poverty line, one in six rural residents is in the same situation; and
- -Government studies reveal than many rural underground water sources are contaminated and rural drinking water is less likely to meet federal bacteriological requirements.

There is a recurrent and substantial myth in the concept of relatives and friends continuing close knit relationships in rural areas. As one ages in the

country, access to transportation and distance from resources often become major problems and act also to separate friends and relatives from each other. "... one plans quite differently to attend a function in a town 25 miles driving distance over a single lane winding road than one does a function 4 miles by bus or car on an interstate highway."[11] While Nass[8] has indicated that the extended family has not entirely disappeared, today few grandparents live with their children and grandchildren. Many live alone or isolated, dependent upon the social activities of senior citizens' groups and government subsidies. Dr. Ruth Nadelhaft,[7] of Bangor Community College, Bangor, Maine, recently noted that the very qualities that Mainers most admire - stoicism, self-sufficiency, self-reliance and individuality - are the very qualities that interfere with neighborliness.

While new safety requirements have made life easier for miners, construction workers and those in many other occupations, farms have emerged as one of the most stressful and dangerous workplaces left in America. A study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health[11] found farmers second to laborers in the number of deaths from heart and artery disease, ulcers and nervous disorders. Many rural occupations are primarily performed outdoors. Weather is consequently a major uncontrolled factor in many rural occupations. In addition, many "rural workers" have no idea what the size of the yield or catch may be, or what the eventual market price will be for the final product. This lack of control over production and market creates substantial stress in agricultural, forestry and fishing occupations. Stress is often compounded in rural areas by the requirement of large sums of capital for both initial investment and ongoing production, which often leads to financial over-extension. Additionally, high interest rates, low prices for products, rapidly escalating land costs, land scarcity and the threats to productivity from weather, insects and diseases

of animals and plants all add significantly to stress potential for many rural residents. These financial worries often extend to the entire family. With finaicial over-extension, families often sacrifice travel opportunities, new appliances, education, etc.

While a body of research has existed for some time concerning the issue of stress among non-farm women who work outside the home, one recent study[1] focused specifically on stress as it related to farm women who are involved with farm work and maintaining traditional family roles. Frequently their involvement included all aspects of the business, from management to working in the barn or in the fields. Stress occurred when their roles conflicted, not different from the responses of their urban counterparts. Stress also is an outcome when the farm tasks and home tasks of women become overloaded, and as individuals or family members they are unable or unwilling to renegotiate their traditional female role functions.

Implications for Social Services

Several studies have established direct connections between level of interaction and stress. Berkowitz and Perkins,[1] for example, found that husband support was a significant predictor of stress and often functioned as a coping mechanism, mediating the stressful effects of role conflict. They further indicate that the content of home and work roles per se may not be as important as interpersonal dynamics in rural farm families. Imig[5] found that the rate of stress was associated with variation in the self-perceived effectiveness of intrafamilial interaction within rural, but not urban, families. For rural families, high rates of stress were associated with low levels of interaction and, conversely, low rates of stress were associated with comparatively higher levels of interaction, suggesting a causal relationship between stress and

patterns of family interaction. Imig went on to speculate that during stressful times the aggregate incidence of, or request for, mental health services from rural families in the area of interpersonal, marital, and parental relationships should increase.

To provide assistance to individuals and families during stressful events, social workers must be aware of both the symptoms of stress and some of the specific stressors that are endemic to Rural America. Some of the symptoms of stress which are closely related to "burnout" and depression, include: trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep; shortness of breath during activity; fainting spells; nervousness; restlessness; a feeling that "people are against you for no good reason;" having worries that get you down physically; and, being worried by loneliness. When stress is diagnosed, one must be cognizant of the stressors specifically germane to rural living.

Three categories of rural stressors stand out. First are the economic and employment stressors. While a significant percentage of the nation's poor live in rural areas - 40% by 1978 figures - a proportionally greater percent of the rural population lives in poverty - 13.% compared to 10.4% in urban areas. Additionally, large segments of rural populations are often unemployed, underemployed and/or seasonally employed. Each of these patterns can produce an unstable, fluctuating, and stressful family environment. Underemployment is an especially difficult problem in rural areas. As Watkins and Watkins noted,[12] rural poverty reflects this situation through the types of jobs available in rural areas as well as a population characterized by inadequate skills, training and education. A second category of stressors are called community stressors. Rural areas tend to have higher dependency ratios than urban areas. A dependency ratio measures the percentage of people in a community who are either over 65 or under 18 years of age, as compared to the

number of individuals in all other age categories. Each of these age periods, i.e., under 18 and over 65, have been linked to higher levels of family stress. Additionally, a higher dependency ratio offers potential for generating community level stress, contributing less to the general economy while requiring greater co munity services, thereby creating a potential tax burden. Sudden economic development often results in a cultural clash within the community; conflicting goals of maximal growth and minimal structural and environmental goals also lead to stress. The third category of stressors is called environmental. The complex interaction between population sparsity, distance, and topography creates a considerable degree of isolation for many rural residents. That is, the tranquility can become "cabin fever," creating severe periods of depression during periods of stress. Of course, all of this can be complicated by extreme weather conditions and other idiosyncratic factors of a particular geographic location.

Counseling may very well be an option for rural families after stress has been diagnosed. Rosenblatt and Keller[10] acknowledged that counseling or family life education would not directly remove such things as economic stressors, but it does offer the possibility of reducing stress through groups in which the individuals learn that others experience similar stress. Additionally, problem solving therapies offer the possibility of providing positive coping mechanisms which enable individuals to deal with the stress in their lives. The authors go on to discuss the positive and negative aspects of what they classify as "blaming dynamics." Stress generally leads to the question of "why?" which usually leads to linear causality in its search for responsibility. "Where people do causal analysis they may adapt better to difficult circumstances, but they may also escalate tention as accusation and counter-accusation, denial and counter-denial lead to increasing distance and anger."[10]

Conclusion

There is little doubt that stress is a concept that must be considered in terms of health and well-being of rural populations. The myths of a stress-free, tranquil existence in the country are detrimental in several respects. First, this inappropriate notion often blinds social welfare planners and policy experts to the provision of an "appropriate quantity and quality" of social services in rural areas. Secondly, a rural population faces a different set of problems than do their urban counterparts. Yet, while all states have rural populations, few universities offer programs to prepare people to provide services to a rural clientele. Social service workers in rural Anne Arundel County, Maryland, one county removed from the nation's capital, serve clients with problems similiar to those of many people in Maine, Montana or New Mexico.

It is important that individual social caseworkers, as well as rural agencies, recognize the myths connected with the issue of rural stress. A mis-diagnosis could prevent appropriate referrals and intervention, or sustained improvement. Social workers must be aware of the increased vulnerability of young rural families, as well as the special needs of the children that come from these families. Only through first acknowledging the existence of stress associated specifically with rural living, and understanding its attendant deleterious effects, can we then begin to develop appropriate intervention strategies and policies for addressing its impact on families in rural settings.

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